



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Equality of Opportunity for Women and Men

As prepared for delivery by Felice Gaer,
Commissioner, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom,
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, September 27, 2005

Mr. Moderator, the OSCE participating States agreed in the Helsinki Final Act to “respect human rights and fundamental freedoms . . . for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.” Despite this commitment and constitutional assertions of equality for all their citizens, many states do little to rectify abuses that primarily affect the human rights of women. Such abuses include discrimination in access to education, economic opportunities or the political process, the refusal of law enforcement authorities to respond to physical or sexual assaults against women by spouses or other family members, or the sexual abuse of women at the hands of combatants. Progress on such issues will be enhanced through the political will of leaders in the OSCE States as well as OSCE initiatives if focused on specific and concrete issues.

In June, the Swedish Government sponsored an OSCE meeting on the role of women in conflict prevention and crisis management. Much attention was paid to the need to improve women’s participation in decision-making structures. Indeed, the OSCE States also committed in the Moscow Document to “encourage and promote equal opportunity for full participation by women in all aspects of political and public life, in decision-making processes and in international cooperation in general.” Women and men have identical civil and political rights and are entitled to have equal opportunities to participate in the political process. Laws or regulations that discriminate against women and prevent them from participating in the political process or deny them equal access to economic opportunities violate women’s inalienable rights and should be eliminated. Holding governments responsible for protecting against such violations is an important function of any society governed by the rule of law.

The United States seeks to broaden women’s political participation in many ways. In 2003, the United States successfully advanced a resolution at the UN General Assembly on “Women and Political Participation.” Political participation involves not only voting, but also advocating, governing, serving in elected and appointed positions, and being involved in decision-making processes, including conflict prevention and resolution processes. The U.S. resolution called on states to eliminate laws and regulations that discriminate against women and prevent them from participating in the political process and to promote equal access to education, information technology, and economic opportunities that enable women to take part fully in the decision-making process.

As we have noted on previous occasions, the OSCE is in a unique position to promote equality of access to the political process and to help increase women’s participation. We encourage the OSCE to assist in voter awareness-raising campaigns to reach out both to

women and men. We encourage the OSCE to conduct leadership training seminars and to reach out to women to participate actively in other OSCE training, such as judicial, legislative and human rights training. OSCE participating States can and must immediately take action to eliminate barriers that prevent full access to the political process and to ensure equal participation of women in all aspects of the democratic process.

Without basic economic resources, however, political participation is unlikely. OSCE States have committed to “encourage measures effectively to ensure full economic opportunity for women, including non-discriminatory employment policies and practices.” Despite this commitment, women in many participating States do not enjoy full and equal economic opportunities. Women face invasive personal questions in job interviews that have no bearing on their skills related to the job for which they applied. Once employed they often face sexual harassment. Women in many countries lack effective legal tools to sanction employers who use such discriminatory tactics. The United States urges all OSCE participating States to enact anti-discrimination laws that enable women, and other targets of discrimination, to pursue an adequate and effective remedy against such discrimination. The United States further urges those states with anti-discrimination laws on the books to support their enforcement through government oversight. This is an area in which the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Office of the Coordinator for Economic and Environmental Activities could actively collaborate to provide technical assistance to OSCE participating States.

Recognizing that entrepreneurship is a path that many women want to follow, the United States actively supports micro-finance programs that promote economic opportunity. Over the last few years, U.S. investment in these small loan and technical assistance programs (three quarters of which go to women) has topped \$130 million. This simple tool gives millions of women the means to better their own lives, the lives of their families and the economy of their countries. We encourage other donor governments to invest in women and small business owners through micro-finance programs.

Women who are beaten in their homes or attacked on the streets, raped, trafficked, or subjected to other forms of violence that threaten their health and their lives cannot participate effectively in the political process, the economy, or the social life of a country. In the Moscow Document, the OSCE States agreed further “to undertake measures . . . to end violence against women.” No state is immune from the problem of domestic violence against women. Addressing such violence requires a long-term commitment by governments and the active participation of civil society.

Effectively addressing this issue requires a framework that provides legal accountability for abusers and fosters the ability of authorities or civil society to respond to a victim’s pleas for help. We congratulate Macedonia for its newly enacted laws on domestic violence, but note once again that Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania, Russia, and Uzbekistan, still do not explicitly define domestic violence as a crime, or define it only as a misdemeanor. We urge the governments of these participating States to make it a priority in the coming year to work with civil society to review and strengthen their laws in this area. Likewise, we urge the Governments of Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to work toward the elimination of abductions, forced marriage and rape of young women as brides.

Finally, we must continue to view the effort to achieve equality of opportunity for women and men as an integral part of the OSCE's efforts to develop democratic institutions, free and fair elections, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental freedoms. Equality depends on the existence of a vibrant democracy in which all citizens can demand their rights. Such a society cannot exist without the full participation of all citizens, including women.